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**Subject:** AP - EPA approves plan to assess damage at San Jacinto River toxic site  
**Date:** Wednesday, December 23, 2015 7:01:12 AM

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EPA approves plan to assess damage at San Jacinto River toxic site

3:54 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2015

HOUSTON — The Environmental Protection Agency said Tuesday that it approved a plan to assess damage to the stone cover of the protective cap for a structure at a southeastern Texas Superfund site that contains toxic waste from a paper mill.

The plan comes as the EPA and county officials disagree over whether the protective cap at the San Jacinto River Waste Pits Superfund site in Harris County suffered some sort of breach that could have allowed toxic dioxins to leak into surrounding water and sediment.

According to EPA spokesman David Gray, a layer of rocks over the pit cover has some damage.

“We do not have any indication that the protective cap itself has been breached,” said Gray, who added that the review of the damaged area is set to begin on Wednesday and will include the collection of sediment samples to see if any toxic material was released.

But Rock Owens, manager of the environmental group of the Harris County Attorney’s Office, said he was surprised the EPA was being tentative about indicating there was a hole in the stone cover or the protective cap.

“I suppose one could argue there may or may not be a hole, but they are proceeding as if there was a hole,” Owens said. “I guess they are just trying to keep people from being panicky, which is understandable.”

A team of divers looked at the protective cap earlier this month after Harris County had complained that the maintenance program for the cap had been insufficient, Owens said.

The waste pits were first constructed in 1965 next to the San Jacinto River and were used to store toxic waste from the paper mill. Over time, part of the pits sunk below the river, eroding part of the containment structure and releasing waste into the river. The EPA in 2008 deemed the waste pits a Superfund site, a designation used for the nation’s most contaminated land. The protective cap was put in place in 2011.

“Equipment and materials to repair the cap are expected to arrive on December 29 and will take from one to two weeks to complete,” Gray wrote in an email. “EPA will be on-site during the assessment and repair activities to ensure compliance with the approved work plan.”

Owens said the county still views the protective cap as a flawed way to deal with the waste.



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“The waste in these pits is some of the most toxic stuff you can get your hands on. The safest way to make sure a big storm doesn’t come in and blow all that stuff out is to pick it up and haul it off,” he said.